

The BELOVED CAPTAIN
THE HONOR OF THE BRIGADE
AN ENGLISHMAN PRAYS

By DONALD HANKEY

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The Beloved Captain

HE came in the early days, when we were still at recruit drills under the hot September sun. Tall, erect, smiling: so we first saw him, and so he remained to the end. At the start he knew as little of soldiering as we did. He used to watch us being drilled by the sergeant; but his manner of watching was peculiarly his own. He never looked bored. He was learning just as much as we were, in fact more. He was learning his job, and from the first he saw that his job was more than to give the correct orders. His job was to lead us. So he watched, and noted many things, and never found the time hang heavy on his hands. He watched our evo-

lutions, so as to learn the correct orders; he watched for the right manner of command, the manner which secured the most prompt response to an order; and he watched every one of us for our individual characteristics. We were his men. Already he took an almost paternal interest in us. He noted the men who tried hard, but were naturally slow and awkward. He distinguished them from those who were inattentive and bored. He marked down the keen and efficient amongst us. Most of all he studied those who were subject to moods, who were sulky one day and willing the next. These were the ones who were to turn the scale. If only he could get these on his side, the battle would be won.

For a few days he just watched. Then he started work. He picked out some of the most awkward ones, and, accompanied by a corporal, marched them away by themselves. Ingenuously he explained

that he did not know much himself yet; but he thought that they might get on better if they drilled by themselves a bit, and that if he helped them, and they helped him, they would soon learn. His confidence was infectious. He looked at them, and they looked at him, and the men pulled themselves together and determined to do their best. Their best surprised themselves. His patience was inexhaustible. His simplicity could not fail to be understood. His keenness and optimism carried all with them. Very soon the awkward squad found themselves awkward no longer; and soon after that they ceased to be a squad, and went back to the platoon.

Then he started to drill the platoon, with the sergeant standing by to point out his mistakes. Of course he made mistakes, and when that happened he never minded admitting it. He would explain what mistakes he had made, and try again. The result was that we began

to take almost as much interest and pride in his progress as he did in ours. We were his men, and he was our leader. We felt that he was a credit to us, and we resolved to be a credit to him. There was a bond of mutual confidence and affection between us, which grew stronger and stronger as the months passed. He had a smile for almost everyone; but we thought that he had a different smile for us. We looked for it, and were never disappointed. On parade, as long as we were trying, his smile encouraged us. Off parade, if we passed him and saluted, his eyes looked straight into our own, and his smile greeted us. It was a wonderful thing, that smile of his. It was something worth living for, and worth working for. It bucked one up when one was bored or tired. It seemed to make one look at things from a different point of view, a finer point of view, his point of view. There was nothing feeble or weak about

it. It was not monotonous like the smile of "Sunny Jim." It meant something. It meant that we were his men, and that he was proud of us, and sure that we were going to do jolly well—better than any of the other platoons. And it made us determine that we would. When we failed him, when he was disappointed in us, he did not smile. He did not rage or curse. He just looked disappointed, and that made us feel far more savage with ourselves than any amount of swearing would have done. He made us feel that we were not playing the game by him. It was not what he said. He was never very good at talking. It was just how he looked. And his look of displeasure and disappointment was a thing that we would do anything to avoid. The fact was that he had won his way into our affections. We loved him. And there isn't anything stronger than love, when all's said and done.

He was good to look on. He was big

and tall, and held himself upright. His eyes looked his own height. He moved with the grace of an athlete. His skin was tanned by a wholesome outdoor life, and his eyes were clear and wide open. Physically he was a prince among men. We used to notice, as we marched along the road and passed other officers, that they always looked pleased to see him. They greeted him with a cordiality which was reserved for him. Even the general seemed to have singled him out, and cast an eye of special approval upon him. Somehow, gentle though he was, he was never familiar. He had a kind of innate nobility which marked him out as above us. He was not democratic. He was rather the justification for aristocracy. We all knew instinctively that he was our superior—a man of finer temper than ourselves, a “toff” in his own right. I suppose that that was why he could be so humble without loss of dignity. For he

was humble too, if that is the right word, and I think it is. No trouble of ours was too small for him to attend to. When we started route marches, for instance, and our feet were blistered and sore, as they often were at first, you would have thought that they were his own feet from the trouble he took. Of course after the march there was always an inspection of feet. That is the routine. But with him it was no mere routine. He came into our rooms, and if anyone had a sore foot he would kneel down on the floor and look at it as carefully as if he had been a doctor. Then he would prescribe, and the remedies were ready at hand, being borne by the sergeant. If a blister had to be lanced he would very likely lance it himself there and then, so as to make sure that it was done with a clean needle and that no dirt was allowed to get in. There was no affectation about this, no striving after effect. It was simply that he felt that our feet were pretty im-

portant, and that he knew that we were pretty careless. So he thought it best at the start to see to the matter himself. Nevertheless, there was in our eyes something almost religious about this care for our feet. It seemed to have a touch of the Christ about it, and we loved and honored him the more.

We knew that we should lose him. For one thing, we knew that he would be promoted. It was our great hope that some day he would command the company. Also we knew that he would be killed. He was so amazingly unself-conscious. For that reason we knew that he would be absolutely fearless. He would be so keen on the job in hand, and so anxious for his men, that he would forget about his own danger. So it proved. He was a captain when we went out to the front. Whenever there was a tiresome job to be done, he was there in charge. If ever there were a moment of danger, he

was on the spot. If there were any particular part of the line where the shells were falling faster or the bombs dropping more thickly than in other parts, he was in it. It was not that he was conceited and imagined himself indispensable. It was just that he was so keen that the men should do their best, and act worthily of the regiment. He knew that fellows hated turning out at night for fatigue, when they were in a "rest camp." He knew how tiresome the long march there and back and the digging in the dark for an unknown purpose were. He knew that fellows would be inclined to grouse and shirk, so he thought that it was up to him to go and show them that he thought it was a job worth doing. And the fact that he was there put a new complexion on the matter altogether. No one would shirk if he were there. No one would grumble so much, either. What was good enough for him was good enough for us. If it

were not too much trouble for him to turn out, it was not too much trouble for us. He knew, too, how trying to the nerves it is to sit in a trench and be shelled. He knew what a temptation there is to move a bit farther down the trench and herd together in a bunch at what seems the safest end. He knew, too, the folly of it, and that it was not the thing to do—not done in the best regiments. So he went along to see that it did not happen, to see that the men stuck to their posts, and conquered their nerves. And as soon as we saw him, we forgot our own anxiety. It was: "Move a bit farther down, sir. We are all right here; but don't you go exposing of yourself." We didn't matter. We knew it then. We were just the rank and file, bound to take risks. The company would get along all right without us. But the captain, how was the company to get on without him? To see him was to catch his point of view, to forget our

personal anxieties, and only to think of the company, and the regiment, and honor.

There was not one of us but would gladly have died for him. We longed for the chance to show him that. We weren't heroes. We never dreamed about the V. C. But to save the captain we would have earned it ten times over, and never have cared a button whether we got it or not. We never got the chance, worse luck. It was all the other way. We were holding some trenches which were about as unhealthy as trenches could be. The Bosches were only a few yards away, and were well supplied with trench mortars. We hadn't got any at that time. Bombs and air torpedoes were dropping round us all day. Of course the captain was there. It seemed as if he could not keep away. A torpedo fell into the trench, and buried some of our chaps. The fellows next to them ran to dig them out. Of course he was one of the first. Then came

another torpedo in the same place. That was the end.

But he lives. Somehow he lives. And we who knew him do not forget. We feel his eyes on us. We still work for that wonderful smile of his. There are not many of the old lot left now; but I think that those who went West have seen him. When they got to the other side I think they were met. Someone said: "Well done, good and faithful servant." And as they knelt before that gracious pierced Figure, I reckon they saw nearby the captain's smile. Anyway, in that faith let me die, if death should come my way; and so, I think, shall I die content,

The Honor of the Brigade

THE battalion had had a fortnight of it, a fortnight of hard work and short rations, of sleepless vigil and continual danger. They had been holding trenches newly won from the Germans. When they took them over they were utterly unsafe. They had been battered to pieces by artillery; they were choked with burst sandbags and dead men; there was no barbed wire; they faced the wrong way; there were still communication trenches leading straight to the enemy. The battalion had had to remake the trenches under fire. They had had to push out barbed wire and build barriers across the communication trenches. All the time they had had to be on the

watch. The Germans were sore at having lost the trenches, and had given them no rest. Their mortars had rained bombs night and day. Parties of bombers had made continual rushes down the old communication trenches, or crept silently up through the long grass, and dropped bombs among the workers. Sleep had been impossible. All night the men had had to stand to their arms ready to repel an attack, or to work at the more dangerous jobs such as the barbed wire, which could only be attempted under cover of darkness. All day they had been dodging bombs, and doing the safer work of making latrines, filling sandbags for the night, thickening the parapet, burying the dead, and building dug-outs. At first they had hardly received any rations at all, the communication with the rear had been so precarious. Later the rations had arrived with greater regularity; but even so the shortage, especially of water, had been terrible. For

several days one mess tin of water had had to satisfy half a dozen men for a whole day. They had not grumbled. They had realized that it was inevitable, and that the post was a post of honor. They had set their teeth and toiled grimly, doggedly, sucking the pebble which alone can help to keep at bay the demon Thirst. They had done well, and they knew it. The colonel had said as much, and he was not a man to waste words. They had left the trench as safe as it could be made. And now they had been relieved. They were out of danger, slogging wearily along the road to the rest camp. They were sick with sleepiness. Their shoulders ached under their heavy packs. Their feet were sore. Their clothes, which they had not changed for a fortnight, were filthy and lousy. They no longer attempted to march in step or to hold themselves erect. Each man limped along as best he could. They were dead tired; but they were not dejected.

They were going to rest; they were going to sleep long and soundly, undisturbed by bombs. They were going to drink their fill of good hot tea and thin Belgian beer. They were going to get stews of fresh meat instead of the eternal Chicago bully. They were going to have a hot bath, and be served out with clean shirts and socks. They were far from dejected. The thought of all these good things to come gleamed in their eyes as they marched, and also the thought that they had done well and had upheld the honor of the New Army, the brigade, and the proud regiment whose name they bore.

A few even began to talk. "Say, mate," remarked one, "ow'd a good ole feather bed do now?" "Ah, and a nice steak and chips when you got up in the morning." "Ah, and what's wrong wiv a pint o' good British beer to wash it dahn wiv?" "And the old woman a-bringing yer a cup o' tea in the morning to your bed?" "And a

nice fire in the kitchen while you reads your paper." "Gahn! Wot's the good of talking silly? 'Ow many of us d'yer think'll ever see 'ome agin?" "Well, mate, there's no 'arm in wishing, and they do say as we shall all 'ave a week's 'oliday arter the brigade's come aht of the trenches the next time."

Soon the talk died down. The chill air of the hour before dawn began to exert its proverbial power of depression. The men felt cold and clammy, they had an acrid taste in their mouths, their spirits seemed to fall to zero. They dragged their feet along the cobbled road with a savage, sullen look on their faces. The last stage of exhaustion was almost reached. A young subaltern, who had been taught that the time to enforce discipline is when the men are tired, started to shout at them: "Keep up there! Pick up the step! Left—left—left, right, left." The men's faces darkened a shade. A few muttered curses

were heard. For the most part they ignored him. The captain, an old campaigner, called him off curtly.

At last they reached the field where they were to bivouac. The dawn was already breaking, and the air beginning to warm. The battalion formed up in column of companies, four long double lines. Arms were piled, and the men marched clear. Then they lay down as they were in rows upon the grass, and the sun rose over a field of sleeping men.

Two hours passed. Away in the distance could be heard the incessant rattle of musketry, mingled with the roar of the big guns. No one heeded it. A motorcycle appeared at express speed. The colonel was roused, the company commanders sent for. The men were wakened up. Down the lines the message passed: "Stack valises by platoons, and get ready to march off in fighting order; the Germans have broken through." The men were

too dazed to talk. Mechanically they packed their greatcoats into their valises, and stacked them. The Germans broken through! All their work wasted! It was incredible. Water bottles were filled, extra ammunition served out, in silence. The battalion fell in, and marched off along the same weary road by which they had come. Two hours' sleep, no breakfast, no wash, no drink. The men were dejected now.

The road was full of troops. Columns of infantry slogged along at the side. Guns and ammunition-wagons thundered down the paved center. Motor dispatch riders flew past with fresh orders for those in rear. The men sucked their pebbles in grim silence. It was no time for grumbling. This meant business. They forgot their fatigue, their thirst, their hunger. Their minds were full of the folk at home whom they might not see again, and of the struggle that lay before them. So they marched, silently, and with frequent halts,

most of the morning. At length they left the road and took to the fields. They were going back whence they had come, by a circuitous route. Shrapnel burst overhead. As they neared the firing line they met streams of wounded returning from the scene of action. The company commanders took charge. One company rested to let another pass, and the men exchanged greetings. Men spoke to each other who only knew each other by sight. An officer caught the eye of a corporal and they both smiled, and felt that there was some curious link between them, hitherto unguessed.

A captain said a few words to his men during a halt. Some trenches had been lost. It was their brigade that had lost them. For the honor of the brigade, of the New Army, they must try to retake them. The men listened in silence; but their faces were set. They were content. The honor of the brigade demanded it. The captain had said so, and they trusted him. They

set off again, in single file. There was a cry. Someone had stopped a bullet. Don't look round; he will be looked after. It may be your turn next.

They lay down behind a bank in a wood. Before them raged a storm. Bullets fell like hail. Shells shrieked through the air, and burst in all directions. The storm raged without any abatement. The whistle would blow, then the first platoon would advance, in extended order. Half a minute later the second would go forward, followed at the same interval by the third and fourth. A man went into hysterics, a pitiable object. His neighbor regarded him with a sort of uncomprehending wonder. He was perfectly, fatuously cool. Something had stopped inside him.

A whistle blew. The first platoon scrambled to their feet and advanced at the double. What happened no one could see. They disappeared. The second line followed, and the third and fourth. Surely

no one could live in that hell. No one hesitated. They went forward mechanically, as men in a dream. It was so mad, so unreal. Soon they would awake. . . .

It appeared that there was a trench at the edge of the wood. It had been unoccupied. A couple of hundred yards in front, across the open ground, was the trench which they were attacking. Half a dozen men found themselves alone in the open ground before the German wire. They lay down. No one was coming on. Where was everyone? They crawled cautiously back to the trench at the edge of the wood, and climbed in. One or two were there already. Two or three wounded men limped in from the rear, and sank on the floor of the trench. The storm raged on; but the attack was over. These were what was left of two companies. All stain on the honor of the brigade had been wiped out—in blood.

There were three men in a bay of the

trench. One was hit in the leg, and sat on the floor cutting away his trousers so as to apply a field dressing. One knelt down behind the parapet with a look of dumb stupor on his face. The third, a boy of about seventeen from a London slum, peered over the parapet at intervals. Suddenly he disappeared over the top. He had discovered two wounded men in a shell hole just in front, and was hoisting them into the shelter of the trench. By a miracle not one of the three was hit. A message was passed up the trench: "Hold on at all costs till relieved." A council of war was held. Should they fire or lie low? Better lie low, and only fire in case of attack. They were safe from attack as long as the Bosches kept on firing. Someone produced a tin of meat, some biscuits, and a full water-bottle. The food was divided up, and a shell bursting just in rear covered everything with dirt and made it uneatable. The water was re-

served for the wounded. The rest sucked their pebbles in stoical silence.

Supports began to trickle in, and the wounded who could not stand were laboriously removed from the narrow trench to some dug-outs in the rear. Two of them were badly hit, and crying out incessantly for water, or to shift their position. One was unconscious and groaning. From the wood came frenzied shouts from a man in delirium. The more slightly wounded tried to look after the others; but soon the water was exhausted, and all they could do was to promise that as soon as darkness fell help would come.

Darkness fell. The battalion had been relieved; but the better part of it lay out in the wood, or in the open before the wood, dead or dying. The wood was full of groaning. Four stretcher-bearers came and took away one man, an officer. The rest waited in vain. An hour passed, and no one else came. Two were mortally hit,

and began to despair. They would die before help came. For Christ's sake get some water. There was none to be had.

A man wounded in the leg found that he could crawl on all fours. He started to look for help. He crawled laboriously along the path through the wood. It was choked with corpses. He crawled over them as best he could. Once he found a full water-bottle, which he gave to a sentry to send back to his mates. At last he was picked up, and taken to the doctor, while others went to look for his mates.

The doctor was in a field. Rows of wounded lay there waiting for stretcher-bearers to come and take them to the ambulances. As many as could went on, those wounded in the leg with their arms on the shoulders of those whose legs were whole. They limped painfully along the interminable road till they came to the ambulance. Then their troubles were over. A rapid drive brought them to the dressing

station. There they were given cocoa, inoculated for tetanus, their wounds washed and bound up. Another drive took them to the camp by the railway. Next morning they were put in the train, and at length reached the hospital. There at last they got the longed-for bath and the clean clothes and—joy of joys—were put to sleep, unlimited sleep, in a real bed with clean white sheets. They were at peace. But out in the open space between the trenches lay some they had known and loved, unburied. And others lay beneath wooden crosses behind the wood. Yet it was well. The brigade was saved. Its honor was vindicated. Though its men might be fresh from home and untried in war, they would not fail. The brigade had had its baptism in blood, and its self-confidence was established for all time.

NOTE.—The action described in the above article has been identified by correspondents

at the front, and so it is necessary to state that although based in the main on an actual experience, features have been freely borrowed from other occasions, and the writer has no authority for placing the construction that he has on the main event.

An Englishman Prays

IN civil life he had always said his prayers. They had done him good, too, in a way. They had been a sort of squaring of his accounts morally. He had tried to see where he had failed, made resolutions to amend, and acknowledged to himself at any rate, that he had failed. He had remembered his relations and friends before God, and it had helped him to do his duty by them. At the same time, he was not in the least degree a mystic. Even in his prayers he had never felt the reality of God. "God" to him was rather the name for the principle of goodness than a Being of infinite power and intimate importance. His greatest religious "experi-

ence" had been a spasmodic loyalty to the Christ-man, stimulating him at rare intervals to sudden acts of quixotism.

When he first enlisted he continued the habit of saying his prayers, more because it was inconvenient than for any other reason, perhaps. The other fellows in the barrack-room did not say their prayers, and he was too English not to feel the more resolved to say his. He was not going to be afraid. So he said them, deliberately and very self-consciously, half expecting to be laughed at. It was very difficult. He could not concentrate his mind. He whispered the words mechanically, his head full of other thoughts. The other fellows paused in their talk the first night, and then went on as if nothing had happened. After that no notice was taken at all. No one followed his example. No one commented, or interfered with him. A little persecution would have hardened his resolve. Being ignored weak-

ened it. He could not bring his mind to bear on his words, and there seemed to be no point in going on. He tried saying them in bed, in the privacy of his blanket. Then one day he forgot; and after that he just omitted to say them ever.

After all it made very little difference. And yet at times he felt that there was a difference. It was a little like a man sitting in a room with a frosted window that only opened at the top. He understood that it gave on to a garden, but he had never seen the garden. He used to sit with the top of the window pulled open, and then somehow one day he forgot to open it, and after that he never bothered. It made so little difference. At times he did notice that the air was a little less fresh, but he was too lazy, or too busy about other matters to bother.

This Englishman's religion had always been a bit like that, like a window opening on to the unknown and unexplored. He

liked to think that his window gave on to a garden, and to think that he sometimes caught the scent of the flowers. But he had never had the energy or the faith to test his belief. Suppose he were to find that after all his garden was only a paved yard! Anyhow he had left the window shut now. At times he regretted it; but a kind of inertia possessed him, and he did not do anything about it.

When he first got to the front he prayed, half ashamed. He was not quite sure of himself, and he prayed that he might not be found wanting. But when it came to the point everything was very prosaic. It was boring, and uncomfortable, and at times terrifying. Yet he felt no inclination to shirk. He just drifted on, doing his bit like the others, and with not too good a grace. He was asked to take the stripe, and refused. It meant more trouble and responsibility. His conscience told him that he was shirking. He grew angry

with it. "Well," he demanded of it, "why have I responsibilities more than anyone else? Haven't I failed?" He put the question defiantly, ostensibly to his conscience, but with an eye to the "Christ-man" in Whom he had almost ceased to believe. To his astonishment he got an answer. It was a contingency with which he had not reckoned. Like a flash this sentence wrote itself across his mind—"Strengthen My brethren." It staggered him. He felt that he knew what it meant. "Don't whine about failure. If you are willing to serve, here is your job, and the sign of your forgiveness—Strengthen My brethren." He took the stripe after all, and fathered the boys of his section.

The final stage came later. There had been a charge, a hopeless affair from the start, undertaken in broad daylight. He had fallen between the lines, and had seen the battered remnant of his company

retire past him to their own trench before a hail of bullets. He lay in the long grass between the lines, unable to move, and with an unceasing throbbing pain in his left leg and arm. A whizz-bang had caught him in both places. All the afternoon he lay still, his mind obsessed by one thought—Would anyone find him when it was dark, or would he be left to die? He kept on wondering the same thing, with the same maddening persistence. At last he must have lost consciousness, for he woke to find that the sun had set, and all was still but for an occasional flare or a random shot. He had lost a lot of blood; but the throbbing had ceased, and if he kept still he felt no pain. He just lay there, feeling strangely peaceful. Above him he could see the stars, and the moon, though low in the heavens, gave a clear light.

He found himself vaguely wondering about the meaning of everything. The

stars seemed to make it all seem so small and petty. All this bloodshed—what was the good of it? It was all so ephemeral, so trivial, so meaningless in the presence of eternity and infinity. It was just a strife of pygmies. He suddenly felt terribly small and lonely, and he was so very, very weak. He was cut off from his fellow men as surely as if he had been on a desert island, and he felt somehow as if he had got out of his element, and was launched, a tiny pygmy soul, on the sea of immensity, where he could find no bearings. Eternity and infinity were so pitiless and uncomprehending. The stars gazed at him imperturbably. There was no sympathy there but only cold, unseeing tolerance. Yet after all, he had the advantage of them. For all his pygmy ineffectiveness he was of finer stuff than they. At least he could feel—suffer. He had only to try to move to verify that. At least he was aware of his own existence, and could even gauge

his own insignificance. There was that in him which was not in them, unless—unless it was in everything. “God!” he whispered softly. “God everywhere!” Then into his tired brain came a new phrase—“Underneath are the everlasting arms.” He sighed contentedly, as a tired child, and the phrase went on repeating itself in his brain in a kind of chant—“Underneath are the everlasting arms.”

The moon went down behind the horizon, and it was dark. They fetched him in at last. He will never again be sound of limb; but there is in his memory and in his heart that which may make him a staunch fighter in other fields. He has learnt a new way of prayer, and the courage that is born of faith well-founded.

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